



AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION SOUTH AFRICA

Remarks by High Commissioner, HE Ms Ann Harrap

**Art and Social Justice Conference
Art for Humanity
Durban University of Technology
Monday 22 March 2010**

Thank you to the Durban University of Technology and the Art for Humanity Director and Coordinator, Mr Jan Jordaan, for the very kind invitation to speak to this conference.

I note that the organisers particularly encouraged innovative presentation formats – roundtables, staged dialogues, screenings and performances. Well I'm afraid today I'm going to reinforce every stereotype you have about bureaucrats and I'm going to deliver a speech in a very traditional, non-creative way!

I'm also going to borrow from a speech made last year by the Australian Minister for the Arts, Peter Garrett, to the Australian Press Club in which he outlined some of the substantial and enduring contributions that the Arts have made to the life of the Australian nation.

Ladies and Gentlemen – this is my second tour of duty as a diplomat in South Africa. I was here in the mid-90's following the first democratic election and one of my roles at that time was to promote Australian culture to the new South Africa. And I remember a very poor joke from that time that went something like: what's the difference between Australia and yoghurt? And the answer was that unlike Australia, yoghurt had a culture.

It was a stupid joke then and remains so now because it fails to recognise that we have a very proud artistic and cultural tradition in Australia. In literature and visual art in particular, but across all creative art forms Australia has much to draw on, to celebrate and enjoy.

We have the extraordinary fact of being the oldest, continuous tradition of storytelling, dance and song by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Most Australians have a reference point of creativity which touches a chord for us, gives us meaning, connects us to our place: whether it be some lines of verse learned at school, a scene from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, or a *Men at Work* song.

But there are other reasons why Australians are proud to support and celebrate the Arts. Minister Garratt listed his top ten reasons as follows:

1. The arts are fun – from the mosh-pit to the Opera House;
2. The arts are good for you – they keep the mind alert and the body active;
3. The arts help you understand yourself, describe your identity and fulfil your potential;
4. The arts bind communities – creating groups and networks in shared experiences;
5. The arts contribute to the economy – creating jobs, exports, tourism, new goods and services;
6. The arts drive innovation – in new technology and new applications of old technology and in thinking up new ways to express and entertain;
7. The arts nourish learning – boosting literacy and numeracy levels, preserving our great collections and making them accessible;
8. The arts are local - they help you understand your country;
9. and yet The arts are also universal - they speak a common language to every man, woman and child; and,
10. The arts express the zenith of human experience and capacity – they're a source of boundless inspiration.

A country without libraries or galleries, without poetry or music, sculpture or dance, without our stories, without reflection, is simply unimaginable.

As an Australian diplomat, I would argue that there is an additional reason for governments and communities to support the arts – and that is to help influence in a positive way, the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of people overseas about Australia's identity, values and ideas. And to make sure that Australia's international image is contemporary, dynamic and positive.

Because, L&G, diplomacy or statecraft is no longer simply defined as negotiations between sovereigns or governments, with the main channels of communication being exchanges between officials. It's about creating links and common understanding – including through the universal language of the arts – to establish platforms for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Or as the American academic Joseph Nye would argue it's about also using 'soft' power to convince others to follow, or agree to, norms and institutions that produce the desired behaviour. Soft power can rest on the appeal of one's own ideas or the ability to set the agenda in ways that shape the preferences of others.

Many governments, including my own, have recognised the value of Nye's words and have put in place what we call 'public diplomacy' actions to inform and influence the populations of other countries.

While we have done this in part because of a belief in the intrinsic value of the arts, we have also done it for hard-headed national interest reasons. Our public diplomacy programs are firmly tied to the advancement of Australia's foreign and trade policies to benefit all Australians; to promote a better understanding of Australia's identity, values and ideas *overseas*; and to promote a better understanding of Australia's foreign and trade policy agenda *within* Australia.

To me the logic is very simple – if people have outdated, stereotyped perceptions about Australia being a white, racist, unsophisticated country that only grows things or digs them out of the ground they are much less likely to want to visit us, trade with us, source their product from us, form alliances with us – and that has implications for the security and economic well-being of Australia and Australians.

Public diplomacy contributes to our national security by helping to build understanding about Australia and its place in the world as a stable, sophisticated, tolerant and culturally diverse nation.

It contributes to our economic prosperity by promoting Australia as a source of innovative and high quality goods and services, as an attractive place to visit and as a country which offers international students first rate educational opportunities.

Both countering misconceptions about Australia, particularly those that threaten to damage our interests, and promoting a positive national image are vital – and frankly, are my bread and butter!

But how do we go about making sure that the world knows that:

Almost one in four of Australia's population of over 22 million was born overseas, and 43 percent have one or both parents born overseas – and the languages most commonly spoken in Australia are English, Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and mandarin?

And how do we, amidst the most challenging financial and economic conditions the world has faced in 75 years, get across messages about the resilience and strength of the Australian economy, messages like:

that Australia maintained stronger growth through the worst of the crisis than any other advanced economy;

that Australia's unemployment rate is lower than nearly all advanced economies;

that Australia remains one of the easiest place to do business in the world and that our competitive advantages are numerous.

Well, obviously one way is for me to use speeches and platforms like this to very subtly plug Australia!

But perhaps more importantly Ladies and Gentlemen, we need to think about who we work with and be flexible in our approach. Many of the Australian government's public diplomacy programs would not be possible without the active involvement of state and territory governments, foundations, and various private bodies from cultural groups and companies through to universities and think tanks.

The nature of the cooperation with these bodies varies. At times, the government enlists the assistance of other bodies to help implement a particular program. On other occasions, we will support the public diplomacy activities of other bodies which can play a role in promoting our foreign and trade goals.

Obviously too we need to be conscious that globalisation and the rapid changes in information technology mean that a country's image can be shaped by various sources that are not necessarily working in partnership with government – sources that we cannot control. The mass media and popular culture affect how overseas audiences view Australia. At times, this creates challenges for the government's public diplomacy efforts. But this is an inevitable and natural feature of a pluralist society and indeed, this very diversity reflects one of the key messages about Australia – that it is a tolerant, open, democratic society based on the rule of law.

So I've outlined who we work with to help shape images of Australia – but what do we actually do? How do we go about using the arts to effect a change in attitude, a new mindset, a freshness of approach in the way in which Australia is viewed overseas? How do we build long-term relationships and an understanding of Australian culture and values?

In Southern Africa, we particularly seek to promote a positive image of Australia:

- through the media and in broader public discourse – my attendance at today's conference for example;
- by showcasing Australian culture and art, including through visit exchange;
- by fostering and encouraging greater linkages and collaborations between the artistic communities in Australia and southern African countries.

I'm particularly pleased for example that Australian artist and poet, Mr William Kelley, is a contributor to the 'Dialogue among Civilisations' exhibition which opened last night and that we at the Australian High Commission were able to support his participation in a modest way.

But there are other examples which I briefly want to share with you which I believe demonstrate the integral role of the arts in framing the debate about the modern-day Australia, including in the area of social justice.

Australia and Social Justice for Indigenous Australians

Many of you may be aware that indigenous Australians have inhabited Australia for more than 60,000 years but currently Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up less than three percent of Australia's population. You may also be aware that through persecution, and as a result of shameful and divisive policies of successive governments, there now exists in Australia a disgraceful gap in life expectancy, health outcomes and access to education between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

But I hope you also know that in February 2008, the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a National Apology to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal People – and so helped to start the healing and reconciliation process between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. As the Prime Minister stated at the time, the Apology was a 'first step' and he acknowledge that much hard work remained to be done to redress serious disadvantages experienced by many of our indigenous peoples – and to close the gap with non-indigenous Australians.

To me, it is so important that South Africans – of all races – have a better understanding of racial issues in Australia; have a better understanding of the changing attitudes of many white Australians; have a better understanding that we are no longer trying to ignore past injustice but seeking to redress those wrongs and look to new beginnings; have a better understanding of the pride that most Australians take in the richness, diversity and dynamism of indigenous culture.

At the High Commission in Pretoria we have sought to broaden that understanding in a number of ways.

Late last year, the High Commission sponsored the South African premiere of the Australian film 'Samson and Delilah', a multi-award winning film directed by indigenous Australian, Warwick Thornton. The film, currently showing in South African cinemas, is a hard-hitting story of the challenges of life for indigenous adolescents in central Australia, including the themes of drug dependency and poverty.

The first screening of the film in South Africa also coincided with a visit by the 2009 Australian of the Year, Professor Mick Dodson, a well-known and widely respected indigenous leader and Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia.

As part of this visit, Professor Dodson held a successful and well-attended public forum with former South African Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Jody Kollapen to discuss each country's respective reconciliation process.

We have also been fortunate enough to have had two indigenous dance groups tour South Africa in recent years. White Cockatoo, from Arnhem Land in Northern Territory toured South Africa in May 2007, performing at Africa Day concerts in Soweto and Mary Fitzgerald Square. The year before that another indigenous group called Descendance shared their unique music, culture and dance with South African audiences.

The screening of the film, the Dodson visit and the indigenous dance groups are clear examples of how international cultural interaction, prompted by exposure to the arts, can expose different perspectives and help shape understanding. Such activities can, of course, also encourage self-reflection for those able to experience them. I was very struck during Mick Dodson's visit by the number of South Africans who commented with renewed pride about the South African Truth and Reconciliation process – particularly as it compared with Australian approaches.

Xenophobia and Racism

I am hopeful Ladies and Gentlemen that there will be further self-reflection, as well as some eye-opening about Australia during the World Cup 2010 when – in addition to all the excitement about sport – there will be an opportunity to showcase international artistic performance.

We are particularly proud to be sponsoring a visit by a multi-media, one-man play called (appropriately) the “The Football Diaries”

The play will feature:

- at the National Festival in Grahamstown (28 June – 4 July);
- at the Football for Hope festival in Alexandria in Gauteng (6 & 7 July); and
- at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg (8-10 July).

The play tells the story of a young Sri Lankan-Australian footballer's foray into professional football in Europe.

Based on five years of journal entries and video blogs, the play is a meditation on art and sport in which an engaging personal story merges with new dance, popular culture and contemporary life in Australia and Europe. But the story also addresses issues of racism, particularly in sport, and xenophobia - very current topics for both Australian and South African audiences. To my mind, it will make a valuable

contribution to the discourse on social justice issues for refugees and displaced persons.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen – I hope I have given you some sense of what we diplomats see as the significant contribution of the arts in helping to shape attitudes and beliefs – as well as the link between those international attitudes and the achievement of broader foreign and trade policy goals designed to bring security and economic prosperity to Australians.

Of course it is extremely difficult to measure the impact of the sorts of public and cultural diplomacy programs that I have described earlier. As Edward Murrow a leading American broadcast journalist once quipped in the 1960's 'no cash register will ring when a mind is changed'.

Building trust and shaping a national image require patience – the dividends of a successful visit or artistic exchange may not become apparent for years – but with public diplomacy now such a standard arm of statecraft there is no prospect that Australia's support for the arts as a key element of any public diplomacy program will change.

Thank you.